



The Story of ICUC(EC)

ICUC arose from the hearings into the proposed Warman Uranium Refinery. The Bayda Enquiry in 1976 had recommended to the Saskatchewan Government to go ahead with uranium mining in northern Saskatchewan.

In 1977 Graham Simpson helped present a brief to the NDP Cabinet protesting uranium mining. This was on behalf of the Saskatchewan Council for International Cooperation. It fell on deaf ears, as the Government was intent, under Blakeney, on going ahead--and played a subtle role in abetting the Warman refinery proposal. The Warman hearings came to a head in 1979 and the group of churches, which had banded together to help the largely Mennonite community, formed a committee called the Interchurch Committee. It disbanded early in 1980 after the successful opposition, which led to the Inquiry Panel recommending against the refinery.

By 1980 it was becoming clear that uranium mining was expanding rapidly with new foreign companies investing large amounts of money in exploration. The public had become conscious of the mines from the Warman Enquiry so a group of people decided to establish a committee within the framework of the churches that had been involved

in the Warman Enquiry.

According to John Kleiner, the first meeting was held on 25 June 1980 and a second on 18 August at which the following names were put forward for the first committee called the Inter-church Uranium Committee: Bill Adamson, Dennis Gruending, John Kleiner, Jim Penna, Irene Poelzer, Robert Regnier, Adele Smillie and Sister Irene Soprocolle.

The committee spearheaded education and the writing of a number of bulletins, press reports, etc. about the dangers of uranium mining. The first major impact of the committee, following a number of public meetings and workshops, was a Joint Statement by Church Leaders in the Province of Saskatchewan (June 1983) calling for a moratorium on uranium mining until more was known about the consequences for humans, the environment, and because of the use of uranium in nuclear weapons. The Cold War was still very HOT and nuclear war was a genuine threat. 13 church leaders signed the statement and five major churches for once managed to agree on something--a truly ecumenical statement (Anglican, Lutheran, United, Roman Catholic and Mennonite). It is hard to tell now what effect that had on the government but it created a lot of education within church communities about the dangers of uranium mining. In 1984 ICUC shifted its activities to include dialogue with northerners, particularly aboriginals who were starting to be affected by the presence of the mining industry.

In 1997 ICUC initiated the Nuclear Weapons Free Zone Campaign in partnership with Ploughshares. The campaign successfully got more than the number of votes necessary to make City Council in Saskatoon place a Referendum vote in the next civic elections (1988). The citizens of Saskatoon came in with a resounding YES to make the City a nuclear-free zone. Council pulled some legal tricks to try to prohibit it and refused to put up the signs at the highway entrances to Saskatoon. BUT it was important in educating Saskatonians that they are

at the hub city of the world's uranium industry, which continues to supply uranium for weapons and to create nuclear waste from the nuclear plants.

In 1989 the nuclear industry, led by AECL, started a huge campaign involving the expenditure of millions of dollars to break into Saskatchewan with nuclear reactors. This began with the attempt to put a Slowpoke reactor on the Campus of the Univ. of Saskatchewan, supposedly for helping the heating system. A very successful counter campaign sprang up, initiated in part by ICUCEC (About this time it added the EC as Educational Co-operative) and several other citizen- and university-based groups (i.e., Pokebusters Citizens' Coalition, STOP=Students Opposing the Slowpoke). AECL withdrew their 'magnanimous' offer not just because of the opposition but also because it became clear they had never had more than a paper plan for the reactor, which was so full of flaws it wouldn't work anyway.

Not to be put off, AECL, together with help from the Tory Provincial Govt., tried hard to sell the Province a CANDU-3 small reactor so ICUCEC members did a lot of hard work combatting the propaganda put around the province through the schools and by the AECL caravan and media advertising. AECL, which had set up headquarters in a large building on Second Avenue in Saskatoon, spent millions of dollars. That attempt also failed, in part because of the change in Government and the huge debt load left by the Tories.

So as the 1980s ended, the Province moved into a new phase of mining activity with the discovery of exceptionally rich uranium pockets in the neighbourhood of Wollaston Lake. These discoveries called for a Federal Provincial Enquiry into whether a further expansion, beyond that allowed from the Bayda Enquiry, was permissible. A joint Federal-Provincial Environmental Assessment Committee was set up under the chairmanship of Dr. Lee. These hearings were in full swing by 1996 and despite the recommendations in the final panel report NOT to go ahead until certain unknowns had been

investigated, the Provincial Government ignored the report and gave the green light to the industry to go ahead in August, 1997.

This was a bitter blow to the anti-uranium movement because of the great number of presentations made to the panel, which had listened and understood the need for the caution advocated by citizens. The glitter of "gold" to be won from the McArthur River Mine alone was enough to cause the Provincial Cabinet to throw caution to the winds and give permission to go ahead. The proportion of uranium (at more than 15%, even as high as 25%) and corresponding radium and arsenic contaminations pose completely new and dangerous threats to the health of mine workers, mill workers and the environment that have never been investigated before. The waste problems constitute serious threats to the waterways and biota in the north.

In 1996-1998 hearings began into the AECL proposal to put nuclear plant wastes into an underground repository somewhere in the Canadian Shield. For a time it appeared that Saskatchewan could be a potential site. ICUCEC and The Saskatchewan Environmental Society played an important role in combatting the proposal at the technical hearings held in Toronto (1997-98) against a huge thrust by the nuclear industry. When the hearings came to Saskatchewan there was a terrific turn-out of citizens, with both group and individual briefs being presented to the panel in opposition to AECL's proposal. The panel was castigated not just for the proposal but also for the arbitrary way it had conducted hearings across the country, making it obvious that aboriginal lands were going to be a prime target for selection of a waste site.

Well, this may have been the biggest victory won by ICUCEC from the groundwork done over more than 16 years in educating the public of not only Saskatoon but also much of the northern areas of Saskatchewan. The Panel, somewhat to our

surprise, came out with the recommendation NOT to proceed because of the unwillingness of the Canadian Public to allow it. They hedged the finding by saying that the proposal was technically OK, which in fact was definitely not true, leaving it open for the Federal Government at some time in the future to go ahead. The truth is that nobody knows what to do with the wastes and so for the foreseeable near future, at least in Canada, they are going to be stored above ground in refrigerated concrete containers, after removal from the "swimming pool" containers where the fuel assemblies are kept until they cool down after about ten years. Lois Wilson's book, published by the United Church, is a must for all anti-nukes to read about how this 8-year panel was manipulated and coerced by Government and Industry.

So, here we are 20 years later with some of the original committee members still active. The task of stopping the mines still lies in front of us. As with all complex problems, there have not been any easy simple solutions. It means constant hard work, vigilance and enthusiasm to keep working on the problem. We are in it for years to come as the industry has such huge investments they will not give up easily, unless there is economic failure, which will most likely be the most probable agent of its demise.

Nevertheless we should take pride in the facts that without our efforts Saskatchewan would have had been saddled with nuclear reactors, possibly a nuclear waste repository, an even more rapacious and damaging mining industry than exists and a public hoodwinked because of lack of knowledge and understanding of the long-term effects of radionuclides on the environment and human beings and animals in Saskatchewan. All those persons who gave their time and efforts will be thanked by future generations for having "blown the whistle" on the nuclear and weapons industries who have profited from a single fact that Saskatchewan happens to be the richest source of uranium in the world. This uranium has been exploited by foreign investments to the detriment of the people and environment of Saskatchewan

who have actually paid out money for the privilege of attracting these industries, despite the propaganda of successive Provincial Governments who have claimed that the uranium mines have been of financial benefit.

Long Live the Inter-Church Uranium Committee!
(Graham Simpson, Nov. 18, 2000)

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